

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
EPIPHANY
SUNDAY 5 JANUARY 2014
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
Jeremiah 23: 5-6; Matthew 1:1-18

“The Missing Link”

The Church of the village I grew up in is undergoing a major refurbishment. Some beetle or other has got to the woodwork and every wooden item in the Church is being taken out and replaced. Rafters, window frames, pews, everything except the pulpit and the organ front, which will be treated with a chemical substance.

I have been following its progress on Facebook

(<https://www.facebook.com/numansdorp.kerkrestauratie?fref=ts>), where they have

been posting photos and stories of what has been happening for months now. The preparation and fundraising has been going on for a couple of years, and, because it is a seventeenth century heritage building, the government has also chipped in considerably.



A lot of the work is being tackled by volunteers and over the last couple of months their enthusiasm and involvement has been incredibly encouraging to watch, especially while, on this side of the globe in our Uniting Church, the Uniting our Future process saw Churches close and congregations disbanded to cover the debt incurred by the synod. In an environment that is as secularised as ours, or possibly even more so, something actively positive seems to be happening over there, involving a lot of people of various age groups, investing in a long-term future for their Church.

In August, a photo was posted on Facebook of the inside of the small, top attic in the roof, a place nobody would ordinarily venture into. I had certainly never been there, even though my father, who was a warden of the Church for many years, showed me pretty much every nook and cranny of the building.

So it was a surprise to see his name there, on one of the rafters, together with two other names, F Prins and D Bijl: Arie Korbijn. I came across the photo while quickly scrolling through my Facebook newsfeed in the morning, and I started the day with a smile on my face and a warm and fuzzy feeling inside. A message in a bottle.

During the day, however, something kept nagging me about that photo. Something that wasn't quite right. So, when I got the opportunity, I went back to Facebook and had another, closer look at it. Sure enough, it said: "Arie Korbijn", but it also said: Jz 1909.

Suddenly it dawned on me that this could not possibly be my father! My father was born in 1934, so 1909 was definitely a bit early for him to leave graffiti in the Church attic. Casting my mind back, I realised it must have been my great-grandfather who had left his name there as a very young man (he must have been around 16 years old at the time), and not my father. He was also a Jan's son, a Jz, and what I was looking at went back a lot further than I had first assumed. This was Arie Jan's son, who was working as a builder in

1909, and not Arie Jan's son who was born in 1934, and started working as a builder in the business his great-grandfather and some of his great uncles were running in 1946!

A small example of how confusing genealogies can be, especially in an environment where few written records were kept and, because of the custom of naming people after their grandparents, people with the same name popped up every second generation.

Who are you? Where have you come from? In the village I grew up in, everybody knew I was Anneke, Arie's daughter, who was Jan's son, who was Arie's son, the builder. There were many more Arie Korbijn's and Jan Korbijn's in the village, but if I gave my "pedigree", people knew immediately to what branch of the family I belonged, and what my "antecedents" were. The virtues and sins of past generations immediately surfaced in the collective memory as soon as people knew whose daughter I was.

What Matthew does for Jesus in that first chapter of his gospel is similar to that, but different. Because what Matthew comes up with are not so much biological facts of genealogy, but a series of relationships that, in his mind, characterise Jesus.

Luke, who also presents us with a genealogy, comes up with something completely different. We check both those New Testament genealogies against the information we can glean from Chronicles and Kings in other places of the Old Testament, and we soon realise the information does not add up at all.

I attached an example of an attempt to solve these issues to your order of service today, and one glance will make it clear to you that if there is a solution (and I don't believe there is), it is so complicated it is impossible to follow.

I believe that this is not because one or the other got it wrong. It is because I know that genealogy, in antiquity, was not so much about biology as it was about relationship and character development. It was about listing what "added up" to someone becoming who they were, about the "making" of someone in the line of history. What Matthew and Luke try to tell us with their genealogies is more about what they believed Jesus was "made of" than what particular gene pool had generated him. It is almost like telling Jesus' story backwards, into the past, and finding meaningful connections, both positive and negative, and with a few surprising twists and turns.

Last week, we discovered that Matthew writes the name David and Abraham in capitals over the genealogy, the book of the making of Jesus. David the King, and Abraham the father of all believers in whom all nations are to be blessed. In the same breath, he connects Jesus with Isaac, Abraham's son, and Solomon, David's son, who each, in their own way, are "brothers" to Jesus, pre-figuring what Jesus will be. The son taken to be sacrificed by his father and saved, and the son who brings wisdom and healing to his people.

The genealogy that follows further elaborates on this, in a variety of ways. It is so laden with information, and so layered in its meaning, I could easily preach another Sunday on it, and another (but I won't).

First of all: 3x14 names. That's not a coincidence. In Hebrew, David has three letters, and the numerical value of these letters adds up to 14. Hebrew didn't have any numbers, so they used letters, with every letter having its own, unique, numerical value. So: the whole genealogy hangs on the name of David, the King.

Except that, if you count carefully it is not 3x14. It is 2x14 and 1x13. There is one name missing.

The formula is very Old Testament (which is different from Luke, who uses another formula); so and so fathered so and so, fathered so and so. The King James translation is much closer to the Greek and the Hebrew with "begat", an active word. Abraham begat (got himself) Isaac, begat Jacob, begat....

When reading the list out loud, this repetition will get you into a rhythm, and was probably designed for that purpose: to get you into a rhythm which would make it easier to remember. And.... to draw your attention to the few spots where the rhythm is broken to add a few bits, or leave them out.

The first of these anomalies happens in verse two, where it says Isaac begat Jacob, Jacob begat Judah and his brothers. Writing at a time when the tribe of Judah was considered to be the true and only remnant of Abraham's inheritance, this signals that, according to Matthew, the whole nation is still part of the picture, including those descendants not of Judah, but of other sons of Jacob.

Then there are the women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba. Four mothers in a list of 42 fathers! All four women with questionable sexual morals, all outsiders, all gentiles. Even Tamar was thought to be gentile by the ancient rabbis, who deemed her behaviour, even though it saved the nation, unsuitable for a decent Jewish woman. All strong, independent women who were prepared to think and act outside the box. There is a fifth woman, of course – Mary, the mother of Jesus – about whose sexual morals questions could, and would, have been raised at the time. And who also proved to be a strong, independent woman. Matthew shows she was not the first such woman in history that led up to Jesus becoming who he was. Five in Hebrew numerology is the number for the law, the five books of Moses. Could it be that the women are spelling out the law in the ancestry of Jesus?

Notice also that while Tamar and Rahab and Ruth are all named, Bathseba is “the wife of Uriah the Hittite”, drawing attention to what David did to her and her husband: first adultery, and then murder.

If any of these names are new to you, and I suspect Tamar especially, may have been absent in your Sunday school story books and subsequent guides for daily bible reading, read up on them - they are worth it. (Tamar: Genesis 38: 6-24; Rahab: Joshua 2,1 and 6: 6-17; Ruth: Ruth; Bathseba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite: 2 Samuel 11: 1-27)

In verse 11, we hear about brothers again, just before exile cuts in, indicating that the whole nation went into exile.

Then, in the last 14 names, if we compare the list to the list given in Chronicles, three names are missing. It's not quite clear why, but it could be because they are the three kings accused of the most heinous crimes in the history of the Jewish people. As if Matthew wants to say: There may be all sorts of things wrong with a lot of these kings, but these three are so bad I believe they are not worthy of a place in Jesus' history. Jeremiah prophesies about one of them that his name will not be remembered, so it may be that that's what Matthew is doing: making sure the name is not remembered.

Comparing the genealogy to Luke's, there are another two very important differences. In Matthew, Jesus is a descendant of Solomon; in Luke, he is not. He comes from another line of the house of David. This is significant, but we will talk about that next week, when we get to Luke. For now, it is enough to notice it. Jesus is akin to Solomon in Matthew's mind, and the line of kings that sprang from him.

Then there is the father of Joseph. In Luke's gospel, Joseph's father's name is Eli; in Matthew, it is Jacob. It is so different, it can hardly be a mistake in hearing or copying the name. According to Matthew, Jesus' father (and we'll talk about that in a minute) is Joseph, the son of Jacob.

Anybody who knows their Old Testament will be familiar with the story of Joseph, son of Jacob, who ended up in Egypt in order to save his people. He was someone who cared for his family, in spite of betrayal, who was faithful, a forgiver, and a dreamer of meaningful dreams. Guess what? That's exactly the Joseph as we know him from the first few chapters of Matthew. A faithful, forgiving carer for his family, who dreams dreams and ends up in Egypt to save his son, and through his son, his people.

This Joseph is the husband of Mary who does not father, or beget, Jesus. If you've followed the rhythm of fatherings from the start, you'll get it immediately: no active involvement of Joseph is mentioned here. Jesus is Mary's son.

And if, for just one moment, you can push aside your twentieth century hang-ups about virgin birth and biological fatherhood, listen to what that says:

Where all the others are the product of their father, and father's father, Jesus is his own man. Although he has been in the making since Abraham, he is not the product of all that begetting, all that fathering that has been going on since time immemorial. Jesus is not a product of male progeny and pride, but he is the son of Mary, a woman, questionable, independent, strong, in the tradition of such women as Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathseba. Akin to a line of Kings going all the way back to David and Solomon, Jesus is, in the end, not the product of that line. Instead, he is the son of the underdog, of a woman of questionable mores, with no pedigree.

Not a princess, not one of the earth mothers (Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, who don't even get a mention in this genealogy), but a girl engaged to a carpenter, who has to flee to Egypt.

(From where he will return to save his people, as the prophets have said the Messiah would, from where Moses led his people to the promised land, where Joseph saved his people from famine, where Abraham discovered God was more powerful than the Pharaoh, mighty ruler of the world. But let's not get too overexcited about all the possible references connected to the word "Egypt" here, as that part of the story is not part of our readings today).

From here on, the story continues, telling the story about Jesus, King in the line of David, in whose stories all these other stories reflect and continue, are developed further and taken to a new height.

Jesus is the 13th name in the third set of names. Some try to solve this issue by doubling the name of Jechoniah, but I don't believe that is the right way to go about this. I think Matthew, on purpose, makes us think of another name to make it 14, a "missing link", the offspring of Jesus, which is the Church.

Here, through Jesus Christ, the generations of David the King, and Abraham the faithful, come to fulfilment; 3x14, 3x the name of David, but also: 2x3x7, double God's fullness in the fullness of time.

That's what this book is about, this gospel. It tells us how that takes shape in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, the new Abraham, the King, the healer of nations. It invites us to become excited about the invitation to become part of the offspring, part of the living Christ, the next generation, in the fullness of time.

On the threshold of the new year, this story tells us of an ancient story that has been going for many generations; a journey that continues to the present day, wherever Jesus is alive in his offspring; a journey with God, through thick and thin, through highs and lows, with vulnerable, fragile people, with Jesus; a journey living towards the fullness of time and the coming of the Kingdom that all these generations have lived towards, which has been in the making forever.

| Amen.

